

COASTAL TOURISM AND RECREATION: THE DRIVER OF COASTAL DEVELOPMENT

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While there is general recognition that coastal tourism and recreation are important in the coastal zone, we believe that their impact is systematically undervalued both economically and as the most important driver of coastal development in many U.S. coastal areas. In California alone, it is estimated that coastal tourism is the largest “ocean industry,” contributing \$9.9 billion to the California economy compared to \$6 billion for ports, \$860 million for offshore oil and gas, and \$550 million for fisheries and mariculture combined (Wilson and Wheeler 1997). Travel and tourism are estimated to have provided \$746 billion to the U.S. domestic product, about 10% of U.S. output, making travel and tourism the second largest contributor to GDP, just behind combined wholesale and retail trade (Houston 1995). Although there are no precise estimates of the magnitude of coastal travel and tourism in the United States, studies have shown that beaches are America’s leading tourist destination, ahead of national parks and historic sites. Approximately 180 million people visit the coast for recreational purposes, with 85% of tourist-related revenues generated by coastal states (Houston 1996, 3).

The following examples highlight the very high value of coastal travel and tourism in the United States (YOTO 1998, F5). A 1996 EPA study on the benefits of water quality improvement, in terms of the numbers of people involved and the economic value of the activities in which they partake, found that saltwater fishing generates expenditures of over \$5 billion annually, and over 200,000 jobs. Over 77 million Americans participate annually in recreational boating, with the total number of recreational boats by the year 2000 estimated to be 20 million. Over 80 million Americans participate in outdoor (non-pool) swimming, and in seven states, beachgoers spent \$74 billion. Finally, birdwatching generates around \$18 billion annually, a great deal of which occurs in coastal regions.

Given these figures, it is significant to note that there is no federal agency with a mandate to manage coastal travel and tourism, and that there is no overall national policy in place to plan for, and achieve, sustainable tour-

ism in the United States. Although it is recognized as a highly valuable revenue earner, promotion and marketing of travel and tourism in the United States lags well behind other countries; the United States ranks 31st in international tourist market advertising, with

Spain, for example, spending ten times more in advertising than the United States (Houston 1996, 3).

A major reason for the lack of a formal program at the national level is that travel and tourism is viewed as a sector that requires relatively little formal

management and is primarily a private sector endeavor. The benefits of tourism to coastal areas are great, yet its adverse effects are often not immediately visible, which leads to a sort of “management apathy.” Also, most aspects of coastal travel and tourism that need managing are already dealt with at one governmental level or another, but in separate programs and run by different agencies, rather than as a coordinated, interconnected whole.

The YOTO paper on coastal tourism and recreation (YOTO 1998) (prepared largely by the authors) notes that sustainable development of coastal tourism depends on a number of factors, including:

- Good coastal management practices, especially related to location of infrastructure and provision of public access;
- Clean air and water, and healthy ecosystems;
- Maintenance of a safe and secure recreational environment, specifically relating to management of hazards, and provision of adequate levels of safety for boaters, swimmers and other recreational users;
- Beach restoration, including beach nourishment and other efforts that maintain and enhance the recreational and amenity values of beaches; and

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- Sound policies for coastal wildlife and habitat protection.

Healthy and sustainable coastal tourism requires attractive, safe, and functional recreational beaches, clean coastal waters, and healthy coastal ecosystems producing abundant fish and wildlife. In most parts of the burgeoning U.S. coastal zone, these factors do not exist by chance. Most recreational beaches have to be maintained with occasional replenishment of sand lost to storms and erosion. Clean and healthy coastal waters are the result of effective programs of pollution control—of municipal sewage treatments, of septic tanks, of agricultural run-off, and a large number of other point and nonpoint sources. Coastal fish and wildlife depend on the existence of healthy ecosystems; wetlands have to be protected and, where already degraded, restored. Failure in any of these areas can seriously affect tourism. A failed sewage treatment plant can close a beach to swimming—in 1996, there were nearly 3000 such closings or advisories (Heinz 1998) at U.S. beaches. The state of New Jersey reportedly lost \$800 million in tourism revenues following reports that medical wastes had washed up on some of its beaches (Bookman, pers. com. 1997).

While there are already programs in place dealing with each of these areas, there is no agency or mechanism in existence to coordinate them toward the overall goal of sustainable tourism development. Federal programs most relevant to coastal travel and tourism include the following:

- *Coastal management and planning* is administered by NOAA's Office of Ocean and Coastal Resource Management (OCRM) and includes programs in 34 states and territories. Three management practices under the Coastal Zone Management program are particularly important in the context of sustainable tourism development: provision for the management of coastal development; provisions to improve public access to the shoreline; and provisions to protect and, where necessary, to restore coastal environments.

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- *Management of clean water and healthy ecosystems* is a second, and especially important, category in this context. There are a number of federal agencies and programs involved with water quality, including the Clean Water Act (e.g. the National Estuary Program) administered by the EPA; protection of the marine environment from oil spills, covered by the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 and administered by the U.S. Coast Guard; and NOAA's work with states under the CZMA to deal with nonpoint source water pollution.

- *Management of the impacts of coastal hazards, including flood and erosion protection* and the use of siting methods such as setback lines, is dealt with under both the FEMA National Flood Insurance Program and the Coastal Zone Management Program. Also important here is safety and accident prevention for visitors involved in coastal recreation—the U.S. Coast Guard is the principal federal agency responsible for user safety and accident prevention. Beach restoration and nourishment programs are managed at the federal level through the Army Corps of Engineers. Increasingly, however, it is local communities, sometimes with state assistance, that are being forced to undertake such restoration programs.

Given the very large contribution to the economy associated with coastal tourism and recreation, it would seem that special policy and pragmatic coordination efforts are needed among the federal, state, and local agencies responsible for the activities mentioned above. We note four policy challenges in this regard.

Policy Challenges

1) Federal policies and programs essential for sustainable tourism development are interrelated and should be treated as such. Consideration should be given to the creation of a standing interagency group devoted to coastal tourism among the various federal agencies with programs in this area. State and local government representatives should also be included.

2) Little guidance is currently available to states and communities for sustainable tourism development in coastal areas. The federal government could play a role in providing guidelines to communities and states (standards, codes of conduct, manuals, etc.) to assist in their efforts to manage coastal tourism and recreation sustainably.

3) At present, there is little systematic collection of data and information on the magnitude, nature, and economic and social impacts of tourism in the coastal zone. This needs to be changed to provide greater information on issues, trends, and the value of tourism at all levels in the United States. The availability of this kind of information will help attract the appropriate level of attention to this issue.

4) Recreational beaches are in great demand in the U.S. both by its own citizens and foreign tourists. Yet there is no comprehensive national program of beach standards yet in effect. EPA is launching a beach action plan dealing primarily with water quality (EPA 1998) and the House of Representatives passed, in 1999, the Beaches Environmental Assessment, Cleanup and Health bill which sets minimum standards for beach water quality, requires the EPA to establish performance criteria for beach monitoring and closure notification, and to establish a national beach water pollution database. While these are significant steps, we think that a national program on beach standards should be broader in scope. The European Blue Flag program, now in place at about 1,000 beaches in different nations of the European community, provides a good model. The flag can only be flown at beaches that meet pre-set standards in water quality, safety (lifeguards, first aid, storm planning), beach management (erosion control, replenishment, clean-up), and environmental information and education (information on fish and wildlife, beach dynamics, tides, currents, etc.). While the program has been encouraged by the European Union and individual governments, the actual operation (judging beaches against the standards) is performed by nongovernmental committees set up in each nation. The U.S. could benefit from a program similar to this one.

Acknowledgments

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